THE TEACHING OF ECONOMICS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

MAN is an economic animal as well as a political animal and is, therefore, born into an industrial system as inevitably as he is born into a political state. Ever since Magna Charta, however, the English-speaking man has been conscious of the state as a structure the organization of which was subject to change at his will, while his consciousness of the industrial system has been more like his consciousness of the weather, the ways of which were past finding out.

But the time has at last come when, owing to the necessity of voting upon economic questions, the spread of socialistic ideas, the atmosphere of evolution which all must breathe, and the economic changes incident upon the "Industrial Revolution," men are becoming more and more painfully aware of some features of the present economic system, and, with their growing power to think and to vote, are asking, with more and more insistence, if all these things must be.

The following forcible statement by a recent writer[1] illustrates my point:

"The working man generally believes five fallacies as firmly, and in some cases as religiously, as his forebears believed in Heaven; and as his belief in Heaven has grown very indefinite, he holds the beliefs that take its place all the more strongly, passionately, bitterly. He believes, first, that the world is his, for he made it; second, that it has been taken from him by the superior strength and cunning of his employer; third, that it is constantly being taken in greater and greater degree—'the rich richer, the poor poorer;' fourth, that if he can put himself in his employer's place he can get it back; fifth, that by his ballot (not to speak of intermediary and ancillary measures, such as

[1] Henry Holt, *Forum*, February 1895.

strikes and boycotts, and making the master's income pay the workingman's taxes) he can put himself in that place, and he is going to do it."

And, again, it is worth while to quote once more from another writer:[1]

"The violent unrest which we call labor troubles is nothing more nor less than an endeavor for the liberty which the working classes think they see the employing classes possessed of. It seems to be a question of more wages with them, and primarily it is a question of more wages, but ultimately it is a question of more power, more ease, more freedom. It is a question of business, of means of livelihood; and how to secure every man in the means of livelihood, and so guarantee equal freedom to all, is the great problem for statesmanship to solve. It has been supposed hitherto by the comfortable sentimentalists that every man would secure himself in them; but the inefficiency of the individual in this direction has been shown so widely that the problem remains; and it is still, as it has always been, the instinctive expectation of the working man everywhere that society would yet somehow warrant the means of earning a livelihood, and so constitute him for the first time a free man."

Similar citations might be multiplied from the words of other men who live in the midst of discontent and yet are not themselves a part of it, while, if we were to turn to the expressions of the men referred to in the quotations already given, the burden of their speech would be found to be the existing economic situation and how to change it. The facts are patent to every reader and in a word are these:

There is almost universal social and economic discontent among the handworkers of this and other countries.

This discontent grows with the growth of general intelligence and political power of the citizens.

These two facts, taken together, point with unwavering finger toward political action of vast economic importance during the immediate future. Indeed, such action has already begun, as,

[1] W. D Howells, *Forum*, December 1895.

for example, in the passage of the Federal Income Tax Law, the creation of State Boards of Railway Commissioners, the passage of the Interstate Commerce Law, and the placing upon many statute books of anti-trust laws.

Economic consciousness exists and will lead to economic action, just as surely as political consciousness has led to political action; and the question to be considered now is—how shall this economic consciousness best be enlightened and guided? Hitherto it has been left largely to the guidance of politicians, labor leaders, the press, and to the instructors in economics in the colleges and universities. And it must be admitted that for the future, also, by far the major part of the economic influence consciously exerted upon king Demos will continue to come directly from the first three of these four sources. They may be blind leaders of the blind or the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, it matters not, the crowd will follow into the open ditch, or into the land flowing with milk and honey. As for the colleges and universities, their ideal function is to be a guide to the guides and they cannot be further considered here than to offer for them a fervent prayer, in passing, that they may be enabled to fulfill their ideal function.

It is by no means the purpose of this paper to minimize the value of other methods of guiding the economic opinion of citizens, but it is rather to emphasize the fitness and opportunity of secondary schools to do far more than has yet been done by them to this end. Greater knowledge of economic facts in their relation and of the evolution of our present economic system is essential to the continued sanity of our political institutions and the continued health of our social and economic life, and yet only about one-twentieth of the secondary schools reporting to the well-known Committee of Ten have thought it worth their while to try to give any training whatever in economics. Nay, further, even some of the schools that have once made the attempt have decided that the game was not worth the candle and have given it up. In the words of the Report itself (p. 181):

"Upon no question which the Conference has considered is there greater difference of opinion among the persons consulted. . . . . 'It is not proved that the subject can be advantageously taught in secondary schools, nor is the contrary proved.' In this difference of opinion it has seemed to the Conference wise to recommend that there be no formal instruction in political economy."

The Report then goes on to recommend the discussion of economic topics in connection with history, civil government, and commercial geography, and affirms the belief of the conference in the great value of *adequate* economic teaching.

Now the causes for this great difference of opinion respecting the advisability of definite economic courses in the secondary schools and the frequent failure of such instruction where it has been tried may be these :

(1) The high-school teachers themselves may be either without any considerable economic training, or they have been so trained that it is exceedingly hard for them to apply the economic knowledge they have to the concrete problems of their own time and locality. Some students have been too exclusively occupied in evolving a conception of the economic world *as it would be* if *it were so*, to see clearly how far the actual world differs from their conception.

(2) Those secondary teachers who have had the courage to try to teach political economy have too often tried to teach the whole economic system of some master by giving it to their pupils in more or less allopathic doses of abstract laws and principles. About the only relief that has been afforded to the victims of this treatment has been the appeal to some general or hypothetical illustrations of the principles memorized; or, perchance, the discussion of such disputed questions as free-trade, bimetallism, a national banking system, etc. At least one result has indeed been attained by this last exercise, viz., such a shock to the partisan opinions and prejudices of the pupils that some of them have at last admitted that there may be two sides to some questions, and that they are not "cock sure," after

all, that they know all about these particular questions. This result has been pointed out with pride by instructors, and it must be admitted that it is of some value in a country where so many men know so many things that are not so.

But the general tendency of this kind of work with beginners is the same in political economy that it is in botany, or physics, or biology, viz., to give satiety and disgust to the intellectual appetite for this kind of food long before the system has assimilated enough of it to be of any practical use. Accordingly, those students who go to work upon leaving the secondary school have not had their minds quickened as they might have been to the organization and structure and movements in the great economic system of which they now find themselves such insignificant and helpless parts. And, on the other hand, those students who go on into the college and university have not the right basis for further scientific economic study. They do not know enough economic facts, their economic vocabulary and memorized principles have so little content that, when they attempt to move on into the field of broader generalizations, and to grasp the nicer distinctions between economic terms, and to understand the significance of the continuous battles between pioneer economic theories, they are comparatively helpless. All this jargon of sounds has a familiar ring to them, but very little meaning. What is the remedy?

There seem to me to be two, or rather, two parts to one remedy, first, a radical change in what is attempted with beginners, and, second, a more scientific method of doing that which is attempted.

In regard to what ought to be attempted with a class of beginners of secondary school age, there is room for great difference of opinion, but, as has already been suggested, it would seem clear that their attention should be directed more to the structure and function of the different parts of the economic system, as it now exists; and more, also, to the historic development of this system than to abstract statements of economic principles and discussions of disputed questions in economic

theory. Much depends upon the content of the pupil's mind when he enters the class in economics. Of this more will be said later.

Respecting the method by which the structure and function of the existing economic system can best be understood, it is here claimed that some modification of the so-called laboratory method is the best. Of course the method will need to be adapted to a social science whose laboratory is the farm, the street, the store, the bank, and the factory.

A word right here may not be out of place as to the meaning of this phrase — *laboratory method* — as used in this paper.

It does not mean that students should be told to go out into their neighborhood in search of such economic facts and phenomena as they may happen upon and report upon these.

It does not mean that the student will never have a use for books and the memorizing of formal statements of economic tendencies and principles.

It does mean that the student shall be so directed and guided to observe and classify special economic phenomena that are all about him that, when the economic law or principle respecting them is finally discovered for himself or read from a book, there can be no doubt whatever that he understands it.

It does mean the creation of the habit, in beginners, of studying men and their marvelous concrete exhibitions of economic activity *as well as*, yes, if it comes to this, *even in place of*, the reading of many books and discussions *about* men and their economic systems.

There will be two sets of objections made to this method of beginning to teach political economy. First, there are some who believe the laboratory method has not accomplished all that was at first claimed for it in the physical sciences and that, consequently, the pendulum is, even now, beginning to swing back toward a larger amount of text-book work. Some of these men even go so far as to say that, in their opinion, "the laboratory fad has had its day;" second, there are others who believe in the laboratory and inductive methods for the physical sciences,

but who, nevertheless, believe that the phenomena in a social discipline like political economy are so complex and subtle that the observation of pupils cannot be controlled and directed toward any definite end—in short, the practical difficulties in the way of teaching political economy by such a method are insurmountable.

In replying to the first class of objections this much only needs to be said, while the laboratory method in the physical sciences has undoubtedly suffered much from over-praise, untrained teachers, and the friction inevitably attending the inauguration of such a method on a large scale, the fact remains that it so meets the needs of the developing human mind, and has already brought forth such fruits of interest and power in pupils that it cannot, as a method of scientific teaching, be overthrown. Pupils need it and it will stay.

In respect to the second group of objections it is likewise urged, on similar grounds, that the mind of a student beginning political economy does not differ essentially from the mind of a student beginning physics, and that, unless economics offers such great practical difficulties to the application of the method as to make it a failure, it must be concluded that this is the most rational method to use in economics as well as in physics.

We come then to the crux of the whole matter, *Can economics be successfully begun by a rational use of the laboratory method?*

To this question no final answer can yet be given by an appeal to the successful experience of large numbers of teachers who have tried it.[1] This much, however, may safely be said,

[1] While the experience of the writer, and of his associate, Mr E. E. Hill, convinces them of the practicability and great value of the method, they do not as yet know of others who have consciously, sanely, and persistently tried it. One of the purposes of this paper is to call out the experience that any teacher may have had in this line in order that all may benefit by the experience of the few. In this way the cause of sound, helpful, and interesting economic teaching may be extended to all secondary schools, to university extension study classes, to Chautauqua classes, and to all other classes of young men and women throughout the land. To this end the writer will consider it a personal favor if teachers who are trying any form of the method under discussion in their economic classes will correspond with him in care of the Hyde Park High School, Chicago, Ill.

that it is the general experience of teachers of political economy to beginners that in proportion to their success in leading their classes to see the application of their economic study to the facts of economic life in their own homes and locality and time have they been successful in making the subject interesting and helpful.

And now, finally, as to the difficulties in the way of using the laboratory method in political economy. I believe that, though the difficulties are real and are not to be despised, they can be overcome if teachers once become convinced that the task is worth while and set about it in earnest.

For example, suppose it is desired to give young men and women some realization of both the complexity and simplicity of the economic processes that are going on all about them, their minds must be made to dwell upon these processes for a longer time and more intensely than usual. Experience has shown that this mental activity and interest may be aroused and maintained long enough to serve the purpose by exercises similar to the following:

For the first recitation period each pupil is asked to bring to the class a list of twenty-five different ways by which persons known to him personally are getting a living—surely a fundamental economic process. During the recitation teacher and class together make out an alphabetic list of five or more occupations for each letter of the alphabet, and each pupil keeps the list for a future recitation. This first exercise, by means of the personal thought of each pupil, the conversation between pupils before and after the recitation, and the incidents of the recitation itself, suggests the complexity of economic activities with new force to most pupils of high-school age. The mind then naturally seeks some simplification, some principles of classification, and, accordingly, for the next exercise the teacher assigns twenty-five or more typical occupations, from the alphabetic list, to be classified on the basis of the essential similarity of their activities. This is a hard task but the pupils will struggle with it with interest, and during the next recitation there can be

evolved from their united products the six groups which economic writers and census reports more or less clearly recognize, viz., extractors, manufacturers, carriers, traders, servants (including men in professional and personal service), and parasites.

With these groups clearly in mind, the question arises, are all occupations included in one or more of these groups? For an answer the pupils next try to classify all the occupations of their alphabetic list, and the next recitation is spent in discussing their difficulties. And out of this effort and discussion comes the new power to resolve the seeming chaos of a crowded city street into a half dozen or so typical groups of activities.

A continuation of this exercise into the field of statistics for the town or city in which the pupil lives, and of the United States as a whole, enables the pupil to construct diagrams for himself which show at a glance the ratio of the different occupations to each other, both in his own vicinity and in the country as a whole. The pupil has now begun to recognize with new pleasure and clearness the economic characteristics of his own town or city. If thought wise he can easily do the same thing for the United States in comparison with England and other countries.

After this line of work has been carried as far as time or facilities will permit, the organization of a special business unit in any one of the first four groups of occupations named above, can be investigated by the pupils. It will be found that one pupil will have special personal relations and facilities for reporting upon one business, and another pupil for another, while the class, as a whole, accompanied by the teacher, can perhaps visit one or two enterprises. From this study there should emerge clearly the functions of government, the landlord, capitalist, manager, and workman, and their varying degrees of differentiation from each other in different businesses.

This done, there might follow exercises designed to reveal the fundamental importance of *private property* to the continuance of economic processes on present lines; exercises which will show the difference between the relations of men which are

based upon *contract* and the relations determined by *custom* or *status*; and, finally, exercises which will show that the six groups of occupations to which all the known complex economic activities have already been reduced can be reduced to one, viz., the occupation of trying to satisfy the whole range of *human wants*.

Almost all of the knowledge which is here treated as of so much importance to beginners that it is worth while to spend days and weeks of their mental activity in order to acquire it, or at least to see it in new relations, is ordinarily assumed by text-book writers to be the natural possession of all. To a certain extent, of course, young people who have lived to a high-school age in the United States understand economic processes and the functions of different elements or factors in production, but they do not as a rule know anything about these processes and functions in their interdependent relations. It is a real knowledge of these relations, as well as to be sure that the elements themselves are known, that is aimed at in the exercises suggested. So important does this seem to be that it is well within the truth to say that the assumption of greater fundamental and related economic knowledge, in the mind of the average high-school pupil, than he actually possesses, is the greatest error of many would-be teachers of economics to beginners.

It seems richly worth while, therefore, at the beginning of a social discipline like economics, as in other scientific disciplines, to spend sufficient time in more or less concrete work to bring into clear view some of the most important elements whose complex combinations and reactions are afterward to be studied and formulated. It even seems worth while in economics to be more careful in this preliminary study than has been found wise in chemistry, for example; for, while the elements like oxygen, hydrogen, etc., of this science are relatively, perhaps absolutely, fixed and stable, the elements of economics are found to be so variable in their manifestations at different periods and in different circumstances that some have even asked if there are any elements.

In order, therefore, to bring into clearer view the present

content and interrelations of such words as *extractor*, *manufacturer*, etc., *landlord*, *laborer*, etc., *status*, *contract*, *private property*, etc., it is advantageous for a pupil to study their past content and interrelations. In other words, after the initial laboratory study of contemporary economic structure has been completed, it has been found especially helpful to study the industrial history, at least of England and the United States, thoroughly enough to bring out the comparative homogeneity of many of these elements in earlier times and to trace their gradual differentiation to the present time.

After this has been done it is an open question, perhaps, whether the pupil should again be directed to a more detailed laboratory study of the present organization of industries for awhile before beginning the ordinary text-book study, or should begin this at once. But, in either case, he will be found to have acquired a new power to grasp the elements and conditions of the task set before him.

Objection has been made by a well-known economic writer [1] to this study of industrial history by beginners as follows:

"It has not infrequently happened that an instructor has precipitated a new student into economic history and the history of the development of economic thought before he was in the least familiar with the principles which explain the relations of economic phenomena. . . . . It is criminal pedagogics to plunge the student into complicated facts before he has become familiar with methods of reasoning and the primary principles of his science."

To this objection it may be said, first, that while, on the face of it, it seems directed especially at the method as outlined above, it does not in reality apply to it at all; for, while the pupil has not here been given "principles" of guidance, in the sense intended by the writer, he has been given in their stead certain definite objects of search or certain functions, the discovery of which and the differentiation of which will give the student safe guidance through the labyrinth of "complicated

[1] Professor J. Laurence Laughlin, *Atlantic*, May 1896, p. 687.

facts;" and, second, it is claimed in this paper that the content of the very terms in which some of the "primary principles of the science" are expressed are not perfectly understood without enough of economic history to reveal something of their evolution. In our view, the laboratory study which has been championed in this paper as the proper way to begin the study of economics cannot be satisfactorily completed without some economic history, how much depends on various circumstances.

We return then to a few final considerations respecting this method. The chief dangers which beset a teacher who attempts it are those which threaten all attempts at partially inductive study, viz., first, that a great deal of time will be spent in covering a little ground; second, that so many details will be presented that no well-defined result shall emerge from their complexity; and, third, that the several inquiries actually pursued, even if successful, will be so diverse and unrelated that at the close no definite group of related facts and principles will cohere in the student's mind.

These dangers are real but not necessarily fatal to the success of the attempt; everything depends upon the skill and fitness of the teacher and the facilities at hand for pursuing the study in industrial history recommended. It is abundantly worth while, however, to spend a long time at the beginning of a subject, in getting a genuine mastery of the data of the subject and their fundamental relations.

In respect to complexity and number of details, if the questions are sufficiently clear and definite, and an answer to them can be discovered from the details examined, pupils can be taught to succeed better than many believe possible. Even if the success in getting perfectly definite results be sometimes only partial, the pupils are brought face to face with many of the conditions, and problems, and movements which inhere in the present relations of human beings to each other, and high-school pupils, coming as they do from every sort and condition of home, are needed to help solve these problems. It is a glorious fact, upon which the justification of the public high school

rests, that these pupils become men and women of more than average influence among their fellows and a conserving force in society. Therefore the leaven of their intelligent appreciation of these fundamental economic conditions and lifelong study upon them should be set to work in the unleavened mass of their own community, and such leaven cannot be wasted without untold loss to the best interests of our civilization.

To make the parts of the work cohere at last in the pupil's mind, the teacher must have had in his own mind, from the beginning, a definite plan of the territory to be covered. It will aid greatly, as the work progresses, and at the end, if teacher and class construct blackboard diagrams of all the work done showing the relations of parts to each other and of parts to the whole.

The difficulties are great, and it will take time to work out the best methods of overcoming them. There is no doubt, also, that teachers are lacking and must be trained for this sort of work, just as they have already been trained, and are all the time now being trained, to teach biology, physics, chemistry, and the other sciences. But were the dangers and difficulties far greater than they are, and trained teachers far more difficult to secure, it is my profound belief that for the sake of saner, more general, and *more interesting* study of the fundamental assumptions, elements, and truths of economics by a large and influential class of American citizens, the secondary schools ought to arouse themselves to a sense of their opportunities and responsibilities in this matter, and prepare themselves to invade the territory of the social science of economics with the laboratory method as successfully as they are already occupying the field of the physical sciences.

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